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"The uh deconstructed pumpkin pie": The use of *uh* and *um* in Los Angeles restaurant server talk

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ABSTRACT

Recent work on the elements *uh* and *um* has focused both on their functional profile and on the sociodemographic patterns of use. They have been shown to be more than just a signal of some trouble in the speech production process; they also perform text structuring functions that are usually ascribed to discourse markers. And their use has been shown to stratify according to gender, age and level of education (e.g. Tottie 2011, 2014). However, such work has not always been sufficiently controlled for context. Differences that were identified for specific speaker groups may ultimately have been caused by different speaker roles or by differences in the formality or privacy of the communicative situation. For this reason, we focus on one single communicative situation, service encounters in selected and socially stratified Los Angeles restaurants. And we focus on one single speaker role, the role of the server. This allows us to test hypotheses about gender differences and socio-economic stratification in a much more controlled environment. In addition, we provide a functional profile of *uh* and *um* in this carefully delimited context, and we show that they are not only used in their often-described functions as planners, hesitators or repair managers but also with a highlighting or a face-mitigating function. The highlighting function turns out to be particularly prominent to emphasize food terminology when servers present menu items to their guests.

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1. Introduction

The last two decades have seen a growing interest in the elements *uh* and *um* in spoken language and beyond (Clark and Fox Tree 2002; Tottie 2011, 2014; Jucker 2015a, 2015b). They are often analyzed as signaling minor troubles in the speech production process, and, depending on the perspective adopted by the researcher, they have been given different names, such as hesitators, fillers, filled pauses or planners. They are certainly very pervasive in spoken language, and researchers have investigated not only their precise function in the speech production process but also their socio-demographic distribution, their distribution in different genres, their use by non-native speakers and so on.

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In this paper, we aim to contribute to this line of research in two very specific ways. We believe that some of the previous research on the macro-social variation of the use of UHM[1] was not sufficiently controlled, that is to say, differences that were attributed to gender, for instance, might have been caused by differences in the speech situations in which these men and women were recorded or their speaker roles. We, therefore, aim to test some of the claims made in the relevant literature in a much more controlled set of data. For this we use the Los Angeles Restaurant Corpus (see Rüegg 2014; Staley 2018), which consists of interactions between servers and guests in three socio-economic tiers of Los Angeles restaurants. The analysis focuses exclusively on the servers who were, at least initially, aware of the recording situation but otherwise performed their everyday task of waiting on guests in their normal surroundings and in the busy context of also serving guests at other tables. This guarantees a high level of similarity and comparability of the communicative situation and makes it possible to carefully isolate the macro-social variables of gender and socio-economic level.

This data also helps us in our second aim. We want to use the carefully delimited communicative situation of waiting on guests to uncover a more precise functional profile for UHM. Because the server's role and the relationship between the servers and guests remains constant across the various restaurant service encounters, we can detect co-occurrence patterns of UHM with specific speech acts, such as suggestions, that are recurring in this situation. In these situations, UHM serves not only as mitigator of minor troubles in the speech production but it is also used regularly as a strategic discourse structuring device. Moreover, our analysis also provides a contribution to the growing body of research on service encounters (see, for instance, Félix-Brasdefer 2012, 2015; Mortensen and Hazel, 2014; Staley 2018; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2019; Dürscheid and Simon 2019).

In the following, we provide a brief overview of the research background. In Section 3, we introduce our data, the Los Angeles Restaurant Corpus. Section 4 presents the demographic breakdown, before we then turn to a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the different discourse functions performed by UHM in this very specific communicative situation of professional waiters waiting on guests.

2. Previous research: social factors and discourse-pragmatic functions

In the following, different strands of research can be distinguished. Some of the earliest studies of UHM were carried out by psychologists rather than linguists, such as Maclay and Osgood's (1959) work on hesitation phenomena in spontaneous English speech and Beattie's work in the 1970s (e.g. Beattie 1977, 1979). More recently, it was in particular Nicholas Christenfeld and his research associates who produced a series of papers in which they investigated UHM, in particular Christenfeld et al. (1991); Schachter et al. (1991); Christenfeld (1994, 1995); Christenfeld and Creager (1996). They used both experimental designs, such as maze description tasks (Christenfeld 1994), and observational studies, e.g. differences between lecturers in the humanities versus lecturers in the natural sciences, to discover the causes and the non-random nature of the use of what they called filled pauses. Bortfeld et al. (2001) continued this work from a psychological perspective and investigated the influence of a range of demographic factors on disfluency rates, including the use of UHM. They used task-oriented conversations to check the influence of the speakers' age, their task role (director versus matcher), the relationship between the participants, their gender among others.

Another way of looking at different groups of people focuses on the difference between native and non-native speakers in their use of UHM. Gilquin (2008: 121), for instance, argues that non-native speakers are particularly prone to encounter planning problems in their speech production and therefore "need techniques that enable them to gain time while they are trying to solve these problems". She used the French component of the Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage (LINDSEI-FR), which consists of transcriptions of interviews of advanced learners of English and the Louvain Corpus of Native English Conversation (LOCNEC), which consists of comparable interviews of native speakers. Overall, she reports mixed results. Some of the elements that she tested were used more often by non-native speakers and others by native speakers, but in the case of filled pauses (she lists *eh*, *em*, *er*, *erm*, *mm*) the situation was very clear with the non-native interviewees using more than three times as many (per 100,000 words) as the native speaker interviewees (Gilquin 2008: 128). Götz (2013) carried out a comprehensive study of fluency phenomena in the speech production of non-native speakers on the basis of the German component of LINDSEI, i.e. LINDSEI-GE, in contrast to LOCNEC. As far as UHM is concerned, she reports very similar results to Gilquin. Her non-native speakers also use it considerably more often than the native speakers, but at a lower rate; they use it only twice as much (Götz 2013: 110) rather than three times as much. In a follow-up study based on the Trinity Lancaster Corpus Sample, Götz (2019) shows that the use of filled pauses in fact also correlates with learners' proficiency levels according to the Common European Framework. The higher the proficiency level (from B1 to C2), the lower the frequency of UHM, but she also points out that "proficiency alone is not a robust predictor for observations of speaker's pauseological behavior, at least as far as the intermediate and advanced levels are concerned" (2019: 174).

A third way of investigating how different people use UHM focuses on its historical development. Culpeper and Kytö (2010), for instance, treat *uh* and *um* together with elements such as *ah*, *ha*, *oh* or *ho* as instances of pragmatic noise. In their data consisting of the Corpus of English Dialogues 1560–1760, *um* occurred only nine times (Culpeper and Kytö 2010: 261), but it is plausible to assume that occurrences of *um* in the written language are much more salient than in spontaneous

[1] Different spellings exist for these elements. British English spelling usually prefers *er* and *erm* for the non-nasalized and the nasalized variant, where American English uses *uh* and *um*. In American English, occasionally *uhm* occurs as well, but for ease of reference we shall use *uh* and *um*, when we need to talk about the two variants separately and UHM when we refer indiscriminately to both of them.

spoken language. In written form they are not caused by the necessities of spontaneous language production, but they are used to simulate or represent spoken language. This idea is further developed by Jucker (2015a, 2015b). Jucker (2015a) provides a small-scale case study of how *uh* and *um* are used as salient stylistic devices in Douglas Adams' mock science fiction novel *The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy*, whereas Jucker (2015b) traces UHM in the Corpus of Historical American English, which comprises texts from 1810 to 2009. In the nineteenth century, only *um* occurs but it is very rare. In the twentieth century, *uh* starts making an appearance and soon overtakes *um* in frequency. But both are rare and serve very specific literary functions of characterizing depicted characters as hesitating, repairing or even lying. The presence of UHM in fiction can provide support for the importance of their role in speech, and they can provide insight into how such devices are interpreted in conversations.

In yet another strand of research, researchers have started to look more closely at how different groups of people use UHM. Tottie (2011), for instance, investigated the frequencies with which different socio-demographic groups use UHM. She used the demographically annotated part of the spoken component of the British National Corpus (BNC). On this basis she found that men, older people and educated speakers use UHM more often than women, younger people and less educated speakers. We will come back to these findings in Section 4, where we will argue that her results need to be treated with care. Some of the reported differences may have been caused by the different situations in which different groups of speakers were recorded. The BNC, in spite of its claim to be a balanced corpus, does not control the distribution of speakers according to the formality of the situation, for instance, or the speaker roles or communicative tasks assumed in the recordings. In this research, Tottie (2011: 193) also introduced a new name for UHM. She suggested the term "planner" because it highlights the positive aspects of UHM in contrast to "filled pause", "filler" or "hesitation marker", which give more prominence to the disfluency aspect of UHM. Although framed more positively, this term is somewhat limiting regarding the functions UHM encompasses.

Laserna et al. (2014) were also interested in the socio-demographic differences of UHM usage. They treated UHM together with the discourse markers *I mean*, *you know* and *like* as filler words and investigated them in transcripts of daily conversations recorded by participants with a device called Electronically Activated Recorder (EAR). In contrast to Tottie, they found that UHM was used at comparable rates across ages and genders. They only found differences for the use of discourse markers, which were used more often by women and by younger speakers.

Tottie (2014) complements previous findings on sociodemographic factors with data from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC) and finds that in general UHM was much less frequent in American English than in British English. Here she focuses on the extralinguistic context, e.g. private versus non-private environments, but she also looked at the sociolinguistic factors and corroborated her earlier findings that older speakers and educated speakers use UHM more frequently than younger or less educated ones. In contrast to her findings from the BNC, she did not find gender differences in her SBC data. However, she also reports very noticeable differences between individual speakers. She, therefore, follows Christenfeld (1995) in differentiating between um-avoiders, ummers and heavy ummers with an additional category of super-ummers. In her investigation of SBC1, the first quarter of the SBC, Tottie (2014: 11–12) looked at 35 individual speakers who contributed at least 500 words each, and she reported an equally large diversity of "umming" behavior, ranging from one um-avoider to one speaker who produced 32 UHMs per 1000 words, or 3.2 per 100 words according to the scale we are using. She reports an average over all 35 speakers of 7.5 and a median of 5.8 per 1000 words (i.e. 0.75 and 0.58 per 100 words). Our figures, as we will show in more detail in Section 4, are slightly higher with an average of 1.25 and a median of 1.19 per 100 words for our 23 speakers. She observes that both men and women appear in the top five as well as in the bottom five ummers, and speakers at the top and at the bottom equally include well-educated speakers with high-ranking jobs (Tottie 2014: 11).

Tottie (2014) found conversation in private and intimate settings to have less than half the UHMs of conversations in non-private settings, in both the BNC and SBC1. This seems to contradict earlier claims that informal conversation contains more UHMs because of the greater frequency of disfluency (cf Swerts 1998). But Tottie (2014) purposefully contrasts the term *private* with *non-private* rather than *public speech* and avoids the terms *formal* and *informal*. Her reasoning is that public spaces do not automatically lead to a style of public speech. She considers *public speaking* to be a different genre completely containing broadcasting and formal addresses and speeches. According to her data, the crucial difference in the ratio of umming is tied to the speech situation, in particular the extra-linguistic context and setting; she posits that it is the non-private contexts which favor higher rates of umming. She attributes this to a greater rate of small talk in private contexts that in her words "requires less forethought and less planning than task-related speech" (2014: 17). Moreover, in small talk "speakers make greater use of automatized collocations, whereas in less intimate and private situations, participants need more time to weigh their words as they strive for precision and accuracy" (2014: 17). Among the transcriptions with the highest UHM ratios there are interactions in a courthouse, in a downtown office of an organization, in a meeting-room at a bank and in a university classroom. At the other end of the scale with low ratios of umming, there are transcriptions in private settings. These conversations typically take place in the kitchens or living rooms of private homes, and the speakers are family or close friends. She corroborates these findings with her earlier results (Tottie 2011) from the BNC, where she found big differences between BNC-DEM (i.e. the demographically sampled part including mostly everyday conversations) and BNC-CG (i.e. the context-governed part including mostly institutional talk, such as classroom interaction etc.). Tottie concludes:

> The Santa Barbara Corpus data as well as those from the British National Corpus show that the use of UHM is above all dependent on extra-linguistic context and register, in ways different from views expressed or assumed by some earlier researchers. I have shown that the more private and intimate a speech situation is, the less likely speakers will be to

> insert tokens of UHM. (This of course does not imply that private conversation is more fluent than speech in non-private contexts — on the contrary, false starts, repetitions and overlaps abound.) On the other hand, in non-private contexts — courthouse, bank, lecture room, office — UHM is frequent. (Tottie 2014: 25)

Other researchers, such as Bortfeld et al. (2001), have considered that the relationship between speakers may have an effect on the rates of UHM, but in their experimental setting, married couples and strangers had similar rates. Thus, the context of the interaction being private or non-private as well as the task may have more of an influence than the relationship of the speakers.

In addition to discussing the dependency of the frequency of umming on extra-linguistic context and register, Tottie (2014) also highlights UHM's multifunctionality and that its functions are not limited to indicating speech trouble and planning. Tottie (2014) provides evidence of additional discourse-pragmatic functions, such as introducing a touchy subject and marking stance.

A growing body of research has addressed UHM's position and function within an utterance. Clark and Fox Tree (2002) analyzed UHM in spontaneous speech as an announcement of a minor (*uh*) or a major (*um*) delay in speaking, and they found that UHM is more likely to occur at the beginning of intonation units as compared to positions later in intonation units. They argue that the use of UHM is not just a result of planning and trouble, but that speakers control their use of them and can use them intentionally. Fox Tree (2002) used an experimental design to investigate how overhearers interpret filled or unfilled pauses before responses to questions and found that speakers who paused were considered to be less honest and less comfortable with the topic under discussion. It was a clear and explicit aim of these early studies to demonstrate that UHM is neither meaningless nor random and that it deserves careful analytical studies.

Tottie (2014) and Clark and Fox Tree (2002) are not alone in their investigation of the discourse functions performed by UHM. Schegloff (2009, 2010), in particular, used a conversation analytic approach to highlight functions of UHM that go beyond its implication in different types of trouble in talking. He showed how, in a string of *and*/*but*/*so* plus *uh*(*m*) plus silence, it can be used as a resource to exit – or re-exit – a conversational sequence (Schegloff 2009). And in Schegloff (2010) he identified additional non-trouble-related uses, in particular in connection with preference organization and as device for launching into the main section of a telephone conversation, i.e. the "reason for the call" segment.

Discourse-pragmatic markers are known for their multifunctionality. In some cases, the function appears to depend on the surrounding linguistic context, whereas in others, multiple functions can be interpreted simultaneously. Norrick (2009) groups *uh* and *um* together with other interjections, such as *mhm* and *uh-huh,* and indicates that, as opposed to other interjections that express emotional states, these express information states. This coincides with other research indicating their role in planning. Moreover, in the turn-initial position they gain interactional importance. Both their role in planning and in interaction point towards their discourse and pragmatic functions.

Kjellmer, who used the Cobuild Corpus for his investigations, found that UHM (in his research transcribed as *er* and *erm*) introduces what he called a new "thought unit", which can be a word, a phrase or an entire clause (2003: 174). Kjellmer likens filled pauses to intonation in that speakers may simultaneously use them unconsciously and purposefully. In the Cobuild Corpus he sees evidence of five different functions: hesitation proper, signposting speaker turns, attracting attention, highlighting and correcting. Hesitation proper is signaled by a co-occurrence with false starts and repeated words. In signposting speaker turns, UHM can be used to indicate a speaker's desire to take, hold a turn or yield a turn. Kjellmer distinguishes between attracting attention and highlighting by classifying UHMs that point towards a speaker as attracting attention and those that point towards semantically heavy elements immediately following as highlighting. The final function of UHM in Kjellmer's data is that of marking repairs and corrections.

From this body of previous research, we can see that UHM is used for a variety of functions having to do with signaling some sort of trouble, such as hesitation, verbal blunders, repetition and repair, and also with structuring interaction by indicating turn-taking, highlighting new and/or semantically heavy content and marking stance. In many cases, occurrences of UHM may simultaneously perform multiple functions. The variation in potential functions may also play a role in their frequency in certain contexts. Thus, when analyzing the functions and frequencies of UHM across contexts, it is highly important that these contexts provide a great amount of comparability.

Much of the research to date is based on either large corpora or experimental settings. Both corpus-based and experimental research have tested the influence of various social factors (e.g. gender, age and socio-economic class), contextual factors (e.g. private, non-private, close relationship and strangers) and linguistic context (e.g. length of utterance) on the frequency and use of UHM, but with mixed results. The discourse collected in large corpora often lacks sufficient control of these variables to allow for others to be contrasted. If the relationship of the speakers, the complexity of the topic or communicative tasks differ, so will the pragmatic and structural needs, making it difficult to attribute differences in the frequency or function of UHM to any particular variable. We, therefore, explore the use UHM in a small, but very carefully constructed corpus with a small range of communicative tasks and speaker relationships that remain constant throughout the corpus, The Los Angeles Restaurant Corpus.

3. Data: The Los Angeles Restaurant Corpus

The Los Angeles Restaurant Corpus (hereafter LARC) is a collection of 22 audio-recorded restaurant service encounters (37.2 h) collected in November 2011, May 2014 and October 2014 (see Rüegg 2014 and Staley 2018: Chapter 3 for details).

Relying on the Labovian assumption of borrowed prestige (Labov, 2006 [1966]: 41), the goal was to create a small corpus of restaurant service encounters in which socio-economic pragmatic variation could be analyzed. This was in line with the requirements of variational pragmatics and its need for data that is comparable, contrastable and empirical (Schneider 2010: 252). Traditionally, these requirements led researchers in variational pragmatics to rely largely on more experimental or questionnaire-based studies in order to sufficiently control for a specific context and elicit certain pragmatic variables from the selected demographic group. But these methods are limited in their ability to sufficiently depict interaction and conversation on the fly. The idea behind LARC was, therefore, that restaurant service encounters provide a narrow range of communicative tasks: guests are welcomed, recommendations are made, orders are taken, dishes are served, and the bill is brought. This ongoing interaction contains a range of speech acts from offers, requests and recommendations to thanks and thanks responses, not to mention terms of address and a range of discourse-pragmatic features. The fairly standard restaurant service encounter provides an everyday setting in which interactants carry out normal everyday tasks that have real-life consequences in contrast to some experimental settings in which they play roles and merely pretend to be carrying out such tasks. The data in LARC is interactive, comparable, authentic and contrastable. This structure provides an ideal framework in which one can compare how different speakers use various pragmatic forms and strategies to accomplish the same tasks. A similar approach has been used, for instance, by Félix-Brasdefer (2015), who focused on service encounters (public markets and grocery shops) in three locations in the United States and Mexico, by Placencia (2008), who looked at requests in corner stores in Ecuador and Spain, or by Dürscheid and Simon (2019), who focused on interactions in bakeries in Zurich and Berlin.

As mentioned above, Tottie (2014: 26) is careful to distinguish private and non-private from informal and formal, and she focuses on non-private rather than public. These distinctions are relevant for our data as well. The restaurant context sits in the middle of Tottie's (2014) scale of private to non-private discourse. The guests are close friends or family, which makes the setting private. However, the encounter is set in a public space, and our investigation focuses on the task-related interaction of the server with the guests with whom they had no previous contact, all of which make it non-private. According to Tottie (2014) the task-related use of language in such a non-private setting should lead to more frequent umming, which is also seen in our data when comparing it to hers.

Despite the consistency of the non-private nature in LARC, the use of language in LARC does show some variation in regard to formality. Servers in the more expensive restaurants (LARC-up) – more frequently than servers working in the restaurants at the lower price points – used formal modals when making offers and more formal thanks responses, such as *you're welcome* and *my pleasure* as opposed to *yeah* and *of course*. Servers in LARC-up also refrained from using less formal address forms, such as *bro* and *you guys,* which were more frequent in the lower price points in LARC (Staley 2018). In addition to some variation in the formality of the servers' use of language, servers in LARC-up were dressed in a more formal white collared shirt, while servers in LARC-low were typically dressed in a t-shirt, often with the restaurant's logo printed on it. Therefore, although the communicative task and the task-related focus of the interaction between the servers and guests remains the same across the range of restaurants and price points, the way in which the servers use language to complete the tasks shows some differentiation.

The restaurants were chosen based on their advertised price–point on opentable.com and sorted into the sub-corpora LARC-up, LARC-mid and LARC-low. Restaurants in LARC-up self-declared a price of >$50 for the main course, a drink and the tip. For the same three items, LARC-mid listed a price-range of $30-$50 and LARC-low of <$30. Although the actual amount paid varied to some extent, the prices indicated on opentable.com as well as other descriptions, regarding the formality of dining style and atmosphere (Staley 2018: 51), play a role in who chooses to dine where. The three price points were then taken as a proxy for socio-economic status. As argued by Ash (2013: 351), social class is not only measured by "objective, economic measures of property ownership" but also by "subjective measures of prestige, reputation, and status". In this study, we can only control for the subjective measures, and take the reputation and prestige of the restaurants as a proxy for socio-economic status. In addition to being selected based on their price point, all of the restaurants were in Los Angeles. They were all "sit-down" restaurants to ensure that there was ongoing interaction between the servers and guests that would not be present at self-service restaurants. All of the restaurants in LARC serve "American" cuisine, such as steak, fish and burgers. The reasoning was that, in such a large international city, including restaurants with other cuisines would increase the chances of adding additional factors, such as non-native speakers and additional languages (Staley 2018: 50).

As discussed in Staley (2018: 44–46), the restaurant setting also provides advantages from an ethical standpoint. Permission to record the speakers (servers and guests), for research purposes, was obtained in advance at the same time as the table reservation was made. By first making a reservation for a table before asking for permission to record the interaction for linguistic research, the employee who took the reservation already perceived the researcher as a guest and obtaining permission from the restaurant manager was unproblematic. Then upon arriving at the restaurant, the server was reminded, and, at the end of the encounter, the involved parties signed a release form. The guests always consisted of the researcher (the first author of this paper) and friends or members of her family who were aware of being recorded and consented to it, but their utterances are not part of the analysis.

Table 1 gives an overview of our data. It includes all the servers who waited on the guests at their table and interacted with them throughout the meal. It does not include managers or hostesses who welcomed the guests at the entrance or servers and bussers whose contribution was limited to bringing or clearing a dish or two to the table and announcing what it is. The method of making reservations at restaurants of the appropriate price points did not make it possible to achieve an equal gender distribution across the different types of restaurants. As a consequence, there are no female servers in the LARC-up

sample, there is a preference for male servers in the LARC-mid sample and only the LARC-low sample shows a more or less balanced gender distribution. This apparently biased sample does, however, appear to reflect a gender bias in the restaurant industry. Although somewhat dated, Neumark, Bank and Van Nort's (1996: 915) finding still seems relevant that "[i]n high-price restaurants (where earnings are higher), job applications from women had an estimated probability of receiving a job offer that was lower by about 0.4, and an estimated probability of receiving an interview that was lower by about 0.35. Both estimated differentials are statistically significant". In the LARC-up restaurants, few female employees, other than hostesses were seen.

Table 1
Overview of LARC: number of servers and number of words.

Size of corpus	Male servers	Female servers	Total
LARC-up	5 (3826 words)	0 (0 words)	5 (3826 words)
LARC-mid	5 (2450 words)	2 (1146 words)	7 (3596 words)
LARC-low	5 (2617 words)	6 (2883 words)	11 (5500 words)
Total	15 (8893 words)	8 (4029 words)	23 (12,922 words)

In order to minimize the inconvenience for the restaurant staff and thus to increase the chance that they would participate in the study, demographic details about the servers were only inferred through observation. The majority of the servers were judged to be in their early 20s to early 30s, with the exception of one server who appeared to be in his early 40s.

The overall size of the corpus is quite small, but it provides a controlled context for a detailed analysis. It totals about 13,000 words produced by a total of 23 servers (fifteen male and eight female). They produce an average of 562 words. The scope is fairly considerable. It ranges from 84 words to 1126 words. As might have been expected, based on the overall word counts and length of the encounters, LARC-up waiters produce the highest number of words on average, totaling 765 words per server. The difference between LARC-mid and LARC-low is relatively small. The LARC-mid servers use 514 words on average and the LARC-low servers 500. The servers in LARC-up had the longest period in which they could converse with the guests as the average restaurant stay in LARC-up was 2.2 h, as opposed to 1.7 h in LARC-mid and 1.4 h in LARC-low.

The small collection of restaurant service encounters in LARC gives us the opportunity to compare how different speakers use UHM to complete an identical range of everyday tasks. The data combines the advantages that are normally associated with a laboratory setting with the advantages of naturally occurring data. There is a high level of control of the involved variables, and at the same time the interactants carry out their everyday tasks which have everyday consequences for all the participants. In addition to serving the table with the recorder, the servers also had to serve and engage with other guests in the restaurant. The servers provide their services as a way of earning money and the guests enjoy a dining experience and subsequently pay for it. The interactions do not involve any play acting or any pretense to perform a role other than the actual roles of servers and guests in a restaurant. This enables us to rule out the role that the complexity or type of the communicative act might have on the use or frequency of UHM.

One additional aspect unique to the restaurant setting must be addressed. In US restaurants, there is a strong tipping culture, and, although at the time of this study California required that servers receive full state minimum wage before tips (U.S. Department of Labor 2020), servers rely on the 20 percent tip as a vital part of their income. This naturally affects the servers' interaction with the guests, as the more, and more expensive, items they can get the guests to purchase, the greater their income will be at the end of the evening. However, if the servers become too pushy, things may backfire if the guests choose to reduce the tip percentage. Thus, making offers and suggestions becomes a delicate situation in the need of various pragmatic resources.

4. Who uses *uh* and *um*?

Some previous research has shown subtle differences between the uses of *uh* and *um*. Smith and Clark (1993), Fox Tree (2002) and Clark and Fox Tree (2002), for instance, have shown that *um* signals a somewhat longer delay in the speech production than *uh* (see also Jucker 2015b: 168). However, in the context of our research questions, some exploratory investigations into possible differences have revealed an inconsistent picture. We, therefore, follow the majority of researchers and treat the two together.

Our total corpus of 12,922 words consists 1363 utterances which contain a total of 166 UHMs (89 *uh* and 77 *um*), i.e. an average of 1.25 and a median of 1.19 UHMs per 100 words. As a first observation, we can support the findings by Christenfeld (1995), Tottie (2014) and many others that individual speakers differ very considerably in their frequency of UHM usage, from UHM-avoiders and light ummers to heavy ummers. This may seem surprising given that all our speakers face the same communicative tasks and presumably very similar levels of planning difficulties. If we set our thresholds relatively arbitrarily at 1 UHM and 2 UHMs per 100 words, we have two UHM-avoiders, eight light ummers, nine ummers and four heavy ummers, and it turns out that they are spread rather evenly across the two genders and the three socio-economic classes of our data, as can be seen in Figs. 1 and 2.

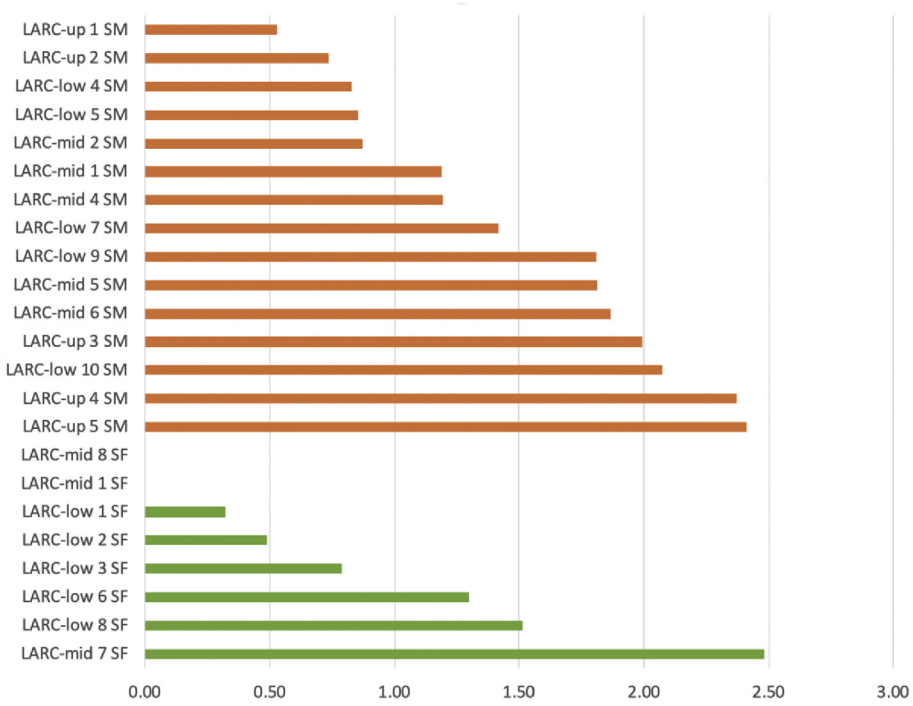

Fig. 1. UHM-avoiders and light ummers (<1.0 UHM/100 words); ummers (between 1.0 and 2.0 UHM/100 words) and heavy ummers (>2.0 UHM/100 words) according to gender (male servers SM: orange; female servers SF: green). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

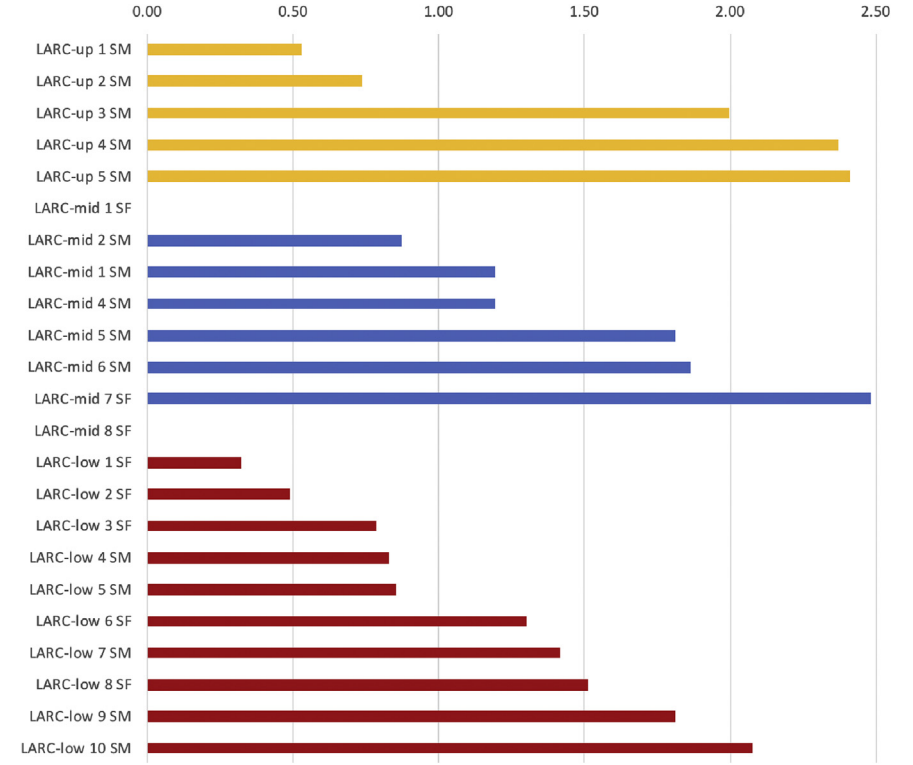

Fig. 2. UHM-avoiders and light ummers (<1.0 UHM/100 words); ummers (between 1.0 and 2.0 UHM/100 words) and heavy ummers (>2.0 UHM/100 words) according to social class (LARC-up: yellow; LARC-mid: blue; LARC-low: red). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

Fig. 1 shows that the two UHM-avoiders in our data are both female servers, but apart from that, light ummers, ummers and heavy ummers appear to be spread more or less evenly over both genders. The same can be said about the three price points. There is one UHM avoider each in LARC-mid and LARC-low, but apart from that, the different types of ummers are attested in all three price points. In our data, we can exclude the influence of the speech situation on the use and frequency of UHM because the speech situation remains constant in all the interactions. This allows us to zoom in on possible gender differences or differences according to the three price points of the restaurants in our sample. However, the small size of our corpus and the large speaker-based diversity shown in Figs. 1 and 2 should warn against far reaching conclusions from our data. As pointed out above, the interactions take place in a non-private, task-oriented context between interactants who did not know each other prior to this interaction and who interact in a way that is orchestrated around the specific task of serving and dining. It seems appropriate, therefore, that the rate of umming in our data is slightly higher than in Tottie's data which includes a broad range of data from private settings as well.

The distribution of UHM across both genders and price points is shown in Figs. 3 and 4. Fig. 3 shows the ratio of UHMs per 100 words for male and female servers according to the three price points of the restaurants in our sample. The differences are small. For male servers the ratios vary from 1.33 to 1.51 per 100 words, and for female servers from 0.97 to 1.22 per 100 words, and the tendencies are inconsistent. We have to assume that the differences are merely random, and it is clear that one or two heavy ummers or um-avoiders could possibly change this figure quite considerably. But Fig. 3 also suggests that female servers um less than male servers. This appears to be consistent both for LARC-mid and LARC-low. Fig. 4, therefore, focuses on the gender difference and displays a somewhat more pronounced difference between the two genders.

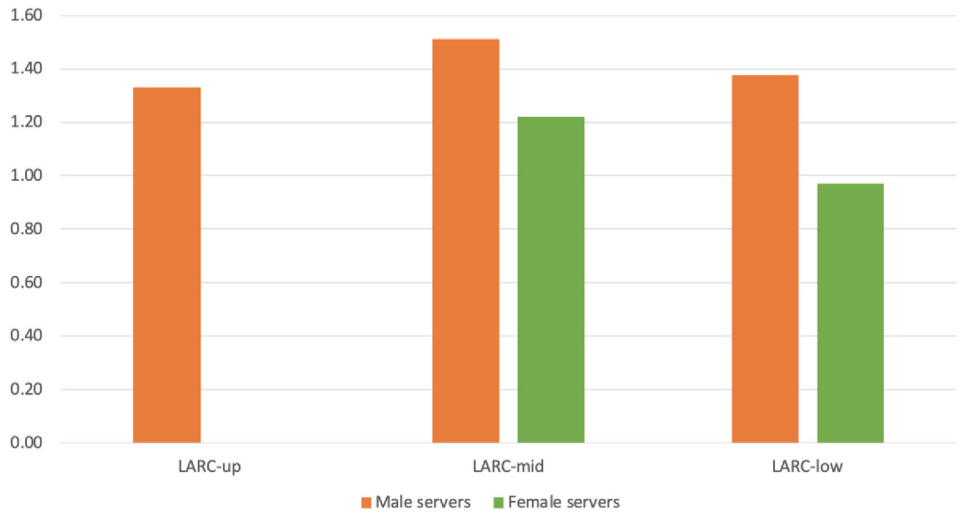

Fig. 3. UHM ratio according to gender and price point of restaurant (per 100 words).

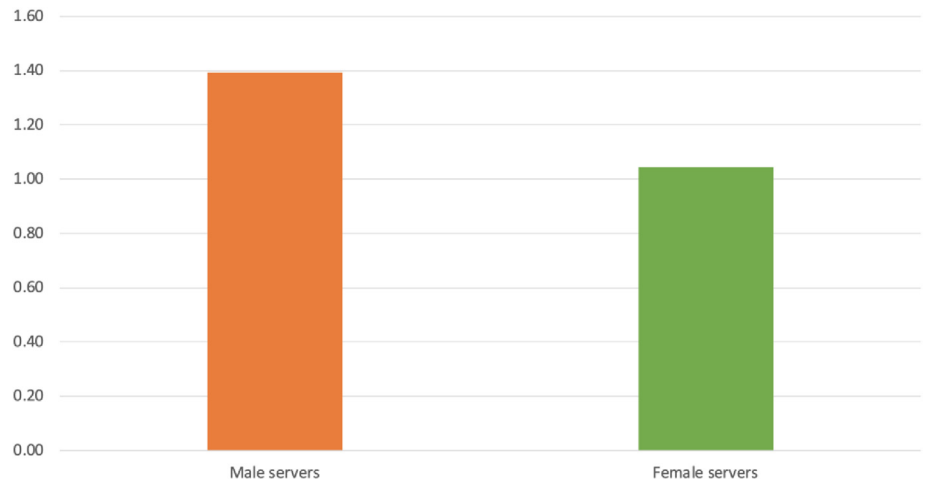

Fig. 4. UHM ratio according to gender (per 100 words).

Fig. 4 shows a rate of 1.04 UHMs per 100 words for female servers and 1.39 for male servers. This is a more noticeable difference, and it would confirm earlier findings, in particular Tottie (2011) that men are higher ummers than women. However, we want to stress again that the size of our corpus does not warrant far reaching quantitative conclusions.

5. Functions of UHM

The functions that previous research on UHM has identified can be split into two main groups. The functions of the first group are related to signaling trouble, repair and planning. The functions of the second are more related to discourse structuring, such as highlighting interactive aspects of turn taking and new or semantically heavy content. From the evidence of UHM in LARC, we would like to add the function of hedging and mitigating potential face threats. In this section, we discuss various extracts from LARC that exemplify all three of these functions: signaling trouble, discourse structuring and mitigating potential face threat. In the following analysis, we also emphasize the multifunctionality of UHM in these extracts. The first three examples illustrate uses of UHM that are predominantly trouble related.

(1) Placing an order for dessert; LARC-mid, male server[2]

1	LARC-mid5SM	it is the= best choice on there (0.8) absolutely.
2	GUEST1F	okay. what's the second best choice?
3	LARC-mid5SM	the second best is gonna be the= (0.9) Farmer's mar- or the
4		**uh**–
5	GUEST5F	the rhubarb pie?
6	GUEST1F	that was [our second choice]
7	LARC-mid5SM	[It's a local organic] strawberry rhubarb pie.

1	LARC-mid7SF	can I bring you some water to start you off?
2		would you like some regular water or bottled water for the
3		table? (0.9.)
4	GUEST1F	[what do you prefer?
5	GUEST4M	[your preference.
6	GUEST1F	(1.1) Um we'll take (0.7) the tap water
7	LARC-mid7SF	tap. **uh** regular water? sure. (0.9)
8		and would you like to see the wine list for dinner as well?

1	LARC-mid7SF	(*Server approaches*)
2		can I tempt you with any dessert?
3		our desserts are fantastic.
4	GUEST1F	I think= a slice of pumpkin pie.
5	LARC-mid7SF	the pumpkin– or the **uh** deconstructed [pumpkin pie?
6	GUEST4M	[yeah
7	LARC-mid7SF	sure. you need any coffee= or cappuccino= or espresso=?

(2) Assessing the desire for drinks; LARC-mid, female server

(3) Placing an order for dessert; LARC-mid, female server

In Extract (1) there are clear indications that the server LARC-mid5SM has planning difficulties. He breaks off a construction, then starts again before he breaks off a second time and produces *uh* after a definite article. The noun is not immediately forthcoming. In Extract (2), the server LARC-mid7SF marks her repair with an *uh*. In her previous turn (lines 1–3) she offered regular water or bottled water as options. But one of the guests asks for tap water. Servers generally repeat the ordered items back to the guests to confirm them. However, in this case, by automatically repeating back the guest's words, the server uses a different term than she started with. She repairs her use of the guest's reference to what is presumably the restaurant's preferred term for non-bottled water. Extract (3) shows a similar occurrence to that of Extract (2). It is an example of both self- and other-repair. The guests order a slice of pumpkin pie. However, the item on the menu is a "deconstructed pumpkin pie". The dessert was not in the form of a pie, but rather served with graham cracker crust crumbles, pumpkin-pie filling and whipped cream placed separately, or deconstructed, on the plate. Although the server starts to repeat the item mentioned by the guest, "pumpkin pie", she repairs her initial utterance, and ultimately the guest's utterance, by stating "the uh deconstructed pumpkin pie". This occurrence of *uh* thus highlights this repair and the correct item.

Examples such as those illustrated in Extracts (1) or (3) occur throughout our data but – as pointed out – they are rare. It is reasonable to assume that the reason for this can be found in the specific communicative situation of these servers. They

[2] Speaker designations that end in SM or SF refer to a male or a female server respectively. Our focus is on these speakers. Speaker designations that start with GUEST refer to the diners, with the final letter again indicating their gender. References for each extract indicate the price point of the restaurant, the server's gender, and the specific communicative activities during the restaurant visit (for details see Staley 2018: 70–72).

interact spontaneously with their guests, but they also perform a professional role that is most likely to be to some extent habitual. They are experienced talkers in this particular role, and they produce largely routinized interactions. They offer the same choices of food every day and even several times a day. They ask the same questions and they make the same suggestions at one table after another. Nonetheless, they have to memorize new daily offers, and it may be a challenge even for experienced servers to remember all the ingredients of a large range of dishes. It may also be relevant that menus in LARC-up restaurants change much more frequently than in those of the other two price points. But at the same time, these menus tend to be much shorter, often no more than just one or two pages. In any case, the spontaneity of the interactions is always paired with a large amount of routine, and therefore the limited amount of planning difficulties should not really be surprising.

In this context, UHM is more useful and appears to be more frequent as a text structuring, and in particular a text highlighting, device, and we want to draw attention to two functions that seem to be particularly prevalent in server talk. In Extract (4), UHM, here realized as *uh*, serves a text structuring function. It occurs at the beginning of discourse units.

(4) Assessing the desire for drinks; LARC-low, male server

1	LARC-low10SM	and then (.) anything to drink?
2		I see you've got some wine. (*from the bar before being*
3		*seated*)
4	GUEST1F	do you want anything else? (*to GUEST8F*)
5	GUEST8F	I might actually have the Prisoner that you're having (*to*
6		*GUEST1F*)
7	LARC-low10SM	**uh** very briefly.
8		this is our drinks list. (0.4)
9		wine by the glass is on this side. reds and whites.
10		(0.7) **uh** shall I grab you some water and then we'll go from
11		there?
12	GUEST11M	thank you (server leaves)

Extract (4) is taken from an early point of the restaurant visit. The server checks on the guests' drinks and appears to want to take orders. The guests already have some drinks because they had to wait at the bar for their table to become available and brought the drinks purchased there to the table, and in (4) they debate whether they want any additional drinks. At line 7, the server interrupts the interaction between GUEST1F and GUEST8F, and the interruption is prefaced by *uh*, which serves a turn-taking function at a point of a slight face threat. The *uh* in line 7 could be mitigating two aspects of potential face threat. On the one hand it introduces an interruption. The server interrupts the guests' deliberation and continues with his spiel. He indicates that he wants to hand over the drinks list before the guests have come to a conclusion whether they want anything else or not. On the other hand, it introduces a suggestion to purchase further drinks, which could be considered a face threat in itself, but even more so in this context where further "extra" purchases increase the final bill and inherently the size of the server's tip. Finally, before waiting for any further reaction, he suggests that he will get some water while the guests have time to decide on drinks. We will return to the face-saving function in conjunction with further examples below.

One of the main functions of UHM in our Los Angeles restaurant data can be described as highlighting. Irrespective of the specific price point of a restaurant, a large part of the servers' communicative task is to talk about food. Therefore, it may not be particularly surprising that UHM regularly occurs in connection with food terms, but a closer look reveals that the association between UHM and food terms is quite remarkable. A rough count reveals that more than half of all the instances of UHM occur together with culinary terms. In some cases, this coincides with a pause, a correction or some other type of planning indicator, but it regularly occurs in situations in which the server expertly goes through a list of special offers and recites the food terms without any additional indication of hesitation or planning. Extracts (5), (6) and (7) are typical examples. Extracts (5) and (6) are taken from the point in the restaurant visit when the server presents the special offers for the entrees. In Extract (7), the entrée is being served.[3]

In Extract (5) the silent pauses frame the additions to the menu and, in addition to the UHMs, provide the listeners with a moment to process the information. From the listener's perspective, these pauses seem to punctuate the speech, thus highlighting the individual items.

(5) Highlighting additions to the menu; LARC-up, male server

1	LARC-up5SM	sure. take your time with the wine list
2		I'll **uh**=. (0.7) just give you the additions to the menu tonight.
3	GUEST1F	Okay
4	LARC-up5SM	I have a French onion soup. (1.3) a cream of corn chowder.
5		and there's bacon on top of that it could be done without. (1.2)
6		the= **uh** fish of the day is a seafood stew. (1.0) and they're
7		gonna put **uh** salmon. trout. halibut. and clams. (0.5) with a
8		tomato broth. (1.2) I have a wagyu of beef. it's a duo. (0.8)
9		it's 4 oz of short ribs. and 5oz of flat iron steak. (0.7) and it's
10		served with **uh** balsamic brussels sprouts. (1.2) I have **uh** an

[3] In Standard American English the term entrée is used for the main course (see Jurafsky 2014: 21–34 and Staley 2018: 49).

11		8oz venison new york. that's served with a dried cherry port
12		wine sauce. (1.5) and then on the menu (.) you can **uh** surf
13		and turf any of the **uh** steaks with lobster. king crab legs.
14		jumbo prawns. want to pick either a
15		rub. or a sauce. all the sauces come on the side. (1.2) if you're
16		gonna do fish. you can do it with a lemon garlic butter.
17		blackened. or the Moroccan cherrmoula sauce. (1.3) you're
18		gonna want to pick some side. dishes to share family style

(6) Highlighting additions to the menu; LARC-mid, female server

1	GUEST4M	that would be great
2	GUEST1F	Yeah
3	LARC-mid7SF	okay (.) we have a soup special. we have one soup on our
4		menu which is a butternut squash. but we also have a roasted
5		corn soup. (0.6) it's white corn has a hint of cream and it's
6		topped with a parmesan twirl. has a little bit of a lime et huile.
7		and then spicy chili sea salt (0.8) sprinkled sprinkled on top
8	GUEST4M	Okay
9	LARC-mid7SF	and the=n we also have an appetizer that is spot prawns. those
10		are coming from **um** Santa Barbara they just came in today.
11		**uh** they are **uh** (0.5) s=erved with a tarragon butter(0.7) what
12		is sauce on top of a muscle and greens. with a **uh** (0.7) Dijon
13		**um** shallot vinaigrette (1.5). and then lastly is the entrée
14		special. and that is an Australian rack of lamb. it is served **uh**
15		crusted with a **um** an herb and **um** wholegrain mustard crust.
16		it also has **uh** Dijon mashed potatoes with it. **uh** charred
17		broccolini and then the sauce is a rosemary wh- red wine
18		Reduction

(7) Serving entrées; LARC-up, male server

1	LARC-up3SM	here this is the oil roasted carrots
2	GUEST5F	thank you
3	LARC-up3SM	parsley puree. (0.9) quinoa - quinoa. chickpea on top (1.6)
4		with the **uh** (0.8) chicken mole verde.
5		With (0.7) **uh** cipollini onions and. or excuse me (1.7) fennel
6		And
7		**uh**. (1.8) crushed **uh**. let me remember.
8		what it was it's a green olive and. (0.7) pursla=ne salad.
9	GUEST1F	thank you
10	LARC-up3SM	and you have the **uh** (0.6) ribs with.
11		the **uh** (1.2) carrot-vadouvan. vadouvan is a **uh** French herb
12		(3.0) anything else right now?
13	GUEST5F	great. fine
14	GUEST1F	no thank you

Most of the instances of UHM in these three extracts appear in front of culinary terms. Typically, they appear between the article and the actual food term. Most of these food terms are complex nouns and several of them with a French or Italian origin, such as “balsamic brussels sprouts”, “Dijon shallot vinaigrette”, “chicken mole verde”, “cipollini onions”, “carrot-vadouvan” and so on, but some simple nouns and adjectives occur as well, as for instance “ribs” or “crushed”. Not all the food terms in these lists of menu items are highlighted in this way, but in these extracts it appears that UHM serves an important function in highlighting the more complex terms. It punctuates the list and subtly draws attention to what are presumably especially desirable culinary items on the list. It is noteworthy that the UHMs are sometimes used in conjunction with pauses, which might suggest that they are planning related. The server needs time to think about the next item. But in many cases, pauses and UHMs are used independently, and it appears that the servers use pauses to give the guests enough time to absorb all the information and the UHMs to highlight important items.

In addition to using UHMs to highlight specific menu items and structure the overview of menu additions, the servers in this dataset also appear to use UHMs to mitigate suggestions and recommendations.

(8) Highlighting additions to the menu; LARC-up, male server

1	LARC-up3SM	additionally. everything on that page is available à la carte. and essentially
2		as an appetizer. (0.9) the **uh** beef ribs and chicken might be a little large
3		on the appetizer size. but not really that much larger. (0.5) and **um** last
4		item on the page. the roasted carrots. are a very long cooking item. so we
5		**um** discourage that as a first course choice.
6	GUEST1F	Okay
7	LARC-up3SM	**um** (0.8) sometimes people like to get that for the table before
8		the entrée course. and then at the bottom of the entrée page is
9		a list of the chef's spontinea tasting menu. (0.7) that is seven
10		savory courses. plus desserts. (0.5) and because of the number
11		of courses involved. that would be a delightful flight that
12		everyone at the table would have to order.
13	GUEST4M	@@ great. thank you

In Extract (8), the first two UHMs, *uh* and *um* in lines 2 and 4, respectively perform the highlighting-structuring function discussed above. The two following *ums*, in lines 5 and 7, appear to perform a face saving or mitigating function. In line 5, the server makes a suggestion about what one should not do, potentially threatening the guests' negative face. Moreover, in line 7, the server uses *um* to take back the turn and provide another suggestion that is also mitigated through indirectness by stating what other people sometimes do. The mitigating function evidenced above occurred in a LARC-up restaurant, but there appears to be a pattern of UHMs occurring in front of suggestions in all three price points.

(9) Assessing the desire for drinks; LARC-low, male server

1	LARC-low10SM	the Mahi-Mahi is what we're famous for but the grilled shrimp are
2		also excellent
3	GUEST1F	(1.5) uh do you like the shrimp or the Mahi Mahi better?
4		(5.0)
5	LARC-low10SM	**uh** I'd go with the Mahi Mahi.
6	GUEST1F	okay then I'll have that

Extract (9), taken from LARC-low, provides a further example of UHM introducing a suggestion. A similar case occurred in Extract (4), above ("**uh** very briefly. this is our drinks list. wine by the glass is on this side reds and whites"). The suggestion in Extract (9) is also formulated in a rather indirect way by focusing on what the speaker would do rather than on what the guest should do. Which, together with the slight delay that the *uh* provides, mitigates the potential face threat.

When looking at these extracts, we can see the multifunctionality of UHM. The functions of planning or hesitation cannot be completely dismissed here. However, the lack of other signals of hesitation, deliberation or trouble lead to the main interpretation that the slight delay that they provide leads to a slight mitigation of these potentially face threatening acts.

6. Conclusion

Our database is not extensive enough to allow strong quantitative claims, but it has the advantage of being very coherent in terms of communicative tasks and relationships between the speakers. The interactions take place in a public space between a small group of family or friends and a server with whom they were not acquainted previous to the recorded interaction. The servers, on whom this investigation focuses, are engaged in a small range of communicative tasks that have to do with offering food and drinks, providing information on these items, taking orders and so on. This allows a much more principled investigation of the speaker demographics. In previous research, it was often unclear whether the speakers under comparison performed the same tasks in comparable situations, and whether reported differences between men and women, for instance, were really due to the gender of the speakers or perhaps, more indirectly, due to a skewed representation of different tasks performed by men or women in the data under analysis. Our research design eliminates this problem. It provides an almost laboratory-like level of precision without the artificiality of a laboratory setting. All interactants went about their everyday business in their everyday roles as servers interacting with guests in their restaurants. The only difference to a completely normal situation was the presence of the tape recorder on the table and the fact that all participants had signed a release form and were, at least initially, aware of the fact that their interactions were being recorded.

The results show very clearly that the most noteworthy factor for the level of umming appears to be the speaker's individual traits. Our data included *um* avoiders as well as light and heavy ummers, and they were attested in all three price points. In contrast, the socio-demographic differences between price points and the gender differences were far less conclusive, except that male servers appear to um somewhat more than female servers, which confirms some of the earlier research that we reviewed in Section 2 above.

The careful focus on one communicative setting with a small number of communicative tasks also allowed a task specific investigation of the different functions performed by UHM. Many of the instances of UHM in our data are multifunctional, and they perform more than just a trouble related function. They regularly perform highlighting or face-mitigating functions. The highlighting function appears to be particularly important in connection with food terms. In fact, more than half of all the UHMs in our data occur in connection with food terms. As pointed out above, some of them can also be related to planning issues. The servers hesitate or they correct themselves. But in many cases, there is no evidence of any planning issues apart from the use of UHM. It would, of course, be possible to argue that the use of UHM in itself is an indication of planning difficulties, but we see UHM as a highlighter that picks out the important food terms for the guests. In spite of the great differences in the number of UHMs produced by individual servers, none of them comes across as a disfluent speaker. All of them appear to be experienced professionals who produce their spiel of advertising the culinary delights of their kitchen with proficient skill and ease. Nevertheless, at a rough count, about a third of all the culinary terms that they produce in their interactions with their guests are prefaced by UHM. In future research, it would be interesting to see whether similar clearly delimited communicative situations in other contexts would corroborate our findings, both in terms of the speaker demographics and in terms of task specific highlighting functions of UHM.

Transcription conventions

Based on du Bois (1991); see also Staley (2018: xii).

Type	Explanation
[ ]	overlapping speech
ˆ	primary accent
‘	secondary accent
@	laughter
–	truncated word
—	truncated intonation unit
=	lengthening
.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
(.)	short pause (less than 0.4 s)
(N)	longer pause
(x)	unintelligible speech
(text)	researcher comments

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